We're here tonight to celebrate the life of Semyon Ivanovich Babchenko. When the Committee asked me to say a few words at this thing, at first I was just like, nooo. Nooo. What could I say to all of you that's worth hearing? Besides I'm not good at this kind of thing, standing up and speaking to people. But obviously I said yes, because here I am. And here you are. So let's get this over with.

So, I think most of you actually **knew Semyon from the factory.** Right? I recognize a lot of faces from there. Well, that's where I first met him. The turbine factory, the LMZ. I was assigned there, was 3 or 4 years, I think it was 4 years after the Revolution. Yeah. The State Commission for Electrification was making a big push at that time to put everyone to work in the factories. Ramp up production, that was during the first 5-year plan. And I, uh, my job was to maintain the belt drives that powered the spindles in the, in the lathes and, well anyway. Semyon Ivanovich was my mentor. He showed me how the motors worked and stuff, cuz I had no idea. You know? I was just fresh off the farm. I grew up on a family farm north of Kazan, near the town of **Chiryuchi**. We weren't kulaks or anything, but yeah, I'm from the country. I never saw a turbine or a lathe or anything like that until I came to the city, in October. You know, the big one: the **Great October**. It seems like just yesterday. **But it wasn't: that was almost 20 years ago! Can you believe it?** Anyway. Here we all are now. In Leningrad. 1936. I know, it's hard to believe. Time goes by so fast. But that moon, up there, think about it: that's the same moon that reflected the sun's light on our Great Revolution in 1917. Yep. And it's always the same moon. They don't switch it out or anything. It's always there. It's like, it's like a great dad. Dependable, visible, distant. Maybe that's **not the best metaphor**, but I do love the moon. And I love my dad. And so did Semyon. He loved the moon, I mean, not my d.., I mean he never, I don't think he ever met my dad. But anyway, wow. I'm sorry. Maybe someone else should be giving this eulogy. Do you want to do it, [insert audience member name]? No? M-kay.

Um but anyway. Semyon Ivanovich Bachenko. He was my friend and my mentor. My mentor first, we became friends later on. Yeah. Sometimes we'd sit outside after shift, in the moonlight [look up, smile], our flasks half full of vodka and just talk about stuff. He told good stories. He told me this one story, this is what I've been building up to. I want to tell you one of Semyon's stories. It's about the time he quit drinking. Can you imagine? **A sober Semyon Ivanovich**.

Now I like to drink, and you know old Semyon he liked to drink. But, back in '31 he had a choice to make. This was when we got the order to build the first **high-powered hydraulic turbines** in the Soviet Union, they're used in **hydroelectric power plants**. Semyon was given the task of turning the primary turbine on the lathe. It was a big responsibility. And he did it! And we did it! We completed the order and Stalin was gonna be happy, and we had a huge party that afternoon on the shop floor. All the workers, the young communists, all the old masters, they came by and shook Semyon's hand, patted his back, said congratulations. One guy gave him a cat. For real. Sorta weird, but it was adorable. So cute.

But um, before long, actually before the party had even ended, one of the foreman discovered a defect in the turbine, and Semyon, he was the one turning the thing, so the blame fell to him. Everyone blamed him for it,

even me. And you know, we all knew how he liked to drink, even on the job. And so we blamed him for it. He blamed himself, too. Semyon, he **took it really hard**.

Yeah, that was a turning point for him. [Hold up bottle to get ready to drink] He realized that he couldn't just keep drinking all the time and expect to do good work. You know? [swig from bottle] He told me that that night his wife, Tamarina, God rest her pious soul, she poured him a glass of vodka. Like she always did, with supper. But Semyon, he didn't pick up the glass. Instead he just looked at the glass. Didn't take his eyes off the glass. The glass, like, he was frozen by temptation, you understand? He did stand up a little, like he was going to leave, but then he sat back down. It was as if the glass had said something to him, something irresistible. He described it, these are his words, he described it as an icy whirlwind. And as he spoke I could see it there, in his face. I saw it in his eyes, this **icy slurry**, just turning his thoughts around and around and around in his head, drowning him.

But he knew how to handle this situation. This was nothing compared to the gulag, so I've heard. Never been. So he was at the supper table, and he took some bread from a plate that Tamarina, God rest her soul, that she had set out on the table. And he tore off a piece of the bread, and dunked it into the glass of vodka, like way down, stuck his fingers in there and everything. And then he sucked up that wet piece of bread, like, like it was the last time he was ever gonna go down on a woman. Yeah, that's actually what he said. His words, I would never say anything like that. But yeah, he went at it, licking his fingers and stuff. That's how much he enjoyed it.

Yeah, you know, I wondered whether I should reference cunnilingus in a eulogy, and now I guess I know the answer. But, um, it's true. **He relished it. The bread. The vodka, actually**. And he knew what he was doing. [pause] This was intentional. It wasn't his funeral yet. He knew what he was doing. That was, that was a last indulgence. So after that, he reached for the bottle and uncorked it. Reached for the glass of vodka, and poured it, back into the bottle. And he corked it back up. Then he pushed out his chair and stood to leave the room. And I guess he went to bed, cuz in the morning he was back at the factory. Sober. He had quit drinking.

He was really proud of that story. He said that that moment was his **personal perestroika.** [drink] Yeah, there were ups and downs still, but that's what he called it. Of course that was before, before that whole thing at the factory, with, what was that traitor's name... **Skvortsov**. Now that, that nearly broke poor Semyon. I'll never forget the psychotic fear on his face when he burst into the Central Committee meeting waiving that flag over his shoulder. But that's another story. I won't go into that here. Nother story for another time, actually...I just realized... They made a whole movie about that, the following year. It was called the **Counterplan**, you should watch it. In Semyon's memory, you should watch it.

Now, if you'll indulge me, now I'm going to recite a little "poem" I wrote for Semyon Ivanovich. It doesn't have a name, it's just a little thing I wrote in his memory. I'm not good at writing things, I'm not a "poet", so please bear with me. Here it goes:

[read from paper in hand]

Semyon Ivanovich Babchenko
you need not journey into the whirlwind
to be stirred to soar. Weekends
are for anything you want to drink:
water from the river, honey from the mink,
vodka soaked bread, the veiled words
of Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

Semyon Ivanovich Babchenko
there will always be a place for you,
Communist or not, you need not choose.
I know you'd never wreck the Soviet.
No matter what, remain the roseate
vodka-soaked man, a gale of bird-
song, humanity's crescendo.

Semyon Ivanovich Babchenko
I heard it through the grapevine that
a man builds a turbine, and the turbine
rebuilds the man. All the poets know,
and the alcoholics, too, that Rousseau
knew a few things, yet undeterred
am I under this waning mirrored memento
of comrade Semyon Ivanovich Babchenko

If Semyon were here tonight, I mean not here not for his own memorial, but for a different social gathering, like a birthday, anniversary, or maybe something unlikely like, like a literary reading or something, I don't know, whatever, the point is, if Semyon were here tonight, under that sliver of a moon, with all of his friends and comrades gathered around, I think he would be so happy. I know he would be. Because he'd be reminded that for all of his faults, and good Lord did he have fault… [laugh a little] speaking of faults, I just remembered that weekend we went to Moscow...no, no no, nevermind, no more stories, especially not that one… where was I? So, for all of his faults, for his drunken mistakes, for his hubris, for his misplaced attention, for his unfiltered and thoughtless rants in public forums, for all the weakness a strong man hides, he'd know that he still belonged. That his country needed him. He belonged *here* - in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics - and although he might lose out on some opportunities or conversations, he wouldn't ever really be cancelled. What's that even mean? I think [hold up index finger] I think, there is room for the old master in the new Russia. There's a place for an old rusty lathe in building of a state of the art hydroelectric power plant. The wise and experienced are the hands and the backbone of the new Communist. And that feeling of belonging that you get from community such as this, it warms the heart more than any bottle. Although a bottle is pretty wonderful, too, once in a while. Na zdorovie, to the memory of comrade Semyon Ivanovich Babchenko. Thanks.